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S E R M O N ,

DELIVERED TO THE YOUNG PEOPLE

OF THE

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL SOCIETY IN CANTON,

ON SUNDAY, MAY 24th, 1835.

BY O. A. BROWNSON.

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NOTE. As my sermon to the young people on Sunday morning, May 24th, was extemporaneous, they must not expect here an exact reproduction of it. I have retained the substance and the form, as nearly as was practicable after the lapse of some weeks. Such as it is, it is committed to the young people of my congregation. That it may have some little influence in aiding them in the formation of those truly christian characters which God and humanity require of them, is the prayer of their sincere friend,

THE AUTHOR.

Eng (Pur)

A SERMON.

*"BUT seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness ;
and all these things shall be added unto you."* Matt. vi. 33.

This morning I preached to the children: I now address myself to the young people of my congregation. I address myself to you, my young friends, because yours is the season of preparation, and because you are soon to be the acting members of society. He who addresses you, and those who are now active with him, will soon be laid in yonder grave-yard, and you will be left alone to fill their places. In a few days you will be the existing generation. You will then have duties to the church, duties to your country, duties to God, duties to humanity ; and I would have you early feel them and prepare yourselves to discharge them with promptness and fidelity.

The first thing I would impress upon your minds is the importance of determining, in the outset of your career, what shall be the great object of your lives. You must have some object. You must not

go through the world objectless, without end or aim, floating in the direction of every wind, like the leaf severed by the frost from its parent branch. You will be nothing, you will succeed in nothing, unless you fix your minds upon some object, concentrate upon it all your energies, and resolve to gain it, let its acquisition cost what it may.

What shall be this object ? To what will you devote yourselves, your lives, your bodies, minds and hearts ? Your own pleasure ? Will you wrap yourselves up in yourselves and say : "Let the world take care of itself ; I care not for others, let them take care of themselves ; enough for me to please myself ?" Will ye propose an object completely selfish, and never suffer a thought or a wish to stray beyond your own narrow self interest ? I can conceive of selfishness in the aged ; I can almost pardon it in the old man who has been for threescore years the sport of a hostile world, who has seen all his plans fail, whose hopes are blasted, heart made cold and desolate, and whose affections are withered by adversity ; but I can hardly conceive it possible for the young man or young woman in the fulness of life, seeing every thing through the sunny medium of a beautiful spring day, open to all generous emotions—I say I can hardly conceive it possible for the young man or young woman, with affections unchilled by the cares and disappointments of age, to become so completely selfish as to dream of regarding nothing but his or her own selfish pleasure. Cold, colder than the dead body, must be the heart of that young man or that young woman, who is contented to be

doomed to seek only a selfish pleasure, a merely selfish interest ! Selfishness in the young ! I have little hope for those who in the morning of life have no regard for others' welfare. I see in them proofs of a depravity so deep-rooted that I fear its cure is hopeless. I can but weep over them as over fallen angels.

But if you resolve on your own pleasure, that your own selfish gratifications shall control all your wishes and exertions, be it so. Be selfish, if you will ; feel that your own dear individual selves are all that deserves a moment's consideration in the universe of God ; but be careful and not complain, should not your success respond to your expectations. You resolve to please yourselves, and if you seek only to please yourselves, will you succeed ? You disregard others ; you will not weep with that afflicted mother ; you will not watch by the sick-bed of that brother or sister ; you will wipe no tear from that eye of wo, pour no oil and wine into that wounded heart, make no exertions to bind up that broken spirit and relieve that distress. Be it so. Go on your way and think only of yourselves. But, when sickness lays its withering hand on you, when you are parched by the burning fever, who will watch by your side ? who will moisten your lips, and by gentleness and assiduity relieve the tedious hours of illness ? Ye have not done, ye have refused to do it, unto others, and if they adopt your principles, they will refuse to do it unto you. Let selfishness become universal, and ye would soon sigh in vain for love and sympathy, for generosity and disinterestedness.

But talk no more, my young friends, of selfishness, of pursuing only your own pleasure, of sporting mere butterflies in your hour of sunshine and then—to die. Ye are made for something higher. God has made you social beings. He has linked, all over the earth, man with man, society with society, and made the good of each consist in the good of the whole. He has given you faculties which are forever leading you away from yourselves, giving you an abiding interest in others, and enabling you to weep with those who weep and to rejoice with those who rejoice. The most miserable beings on earth are those who seek only to please themselves. They deny the noblest part of their natures; they forswear the exercise of their purest and sweetest affections, and though made in the image of God they live and die mere animals.

You will not, I am sure, my young friends, consent to live and act merely for your own selfish pleasure. What then will you seek? What will you fix upon as the great object of all your thoughts, wishes and labors? Shall it be wealth? Will you live and toil simply to become rich?

Wealth is the leading object of a great portion of our countrymen. To become rich is apparently the “one thing needful.” Most of our young men, whenever they look around them and ask what they shall pursue, answer, wealth. Soon as they begin to inquire, it is, how they may become rich, where is a good chance for speculation, the best opportunity for making money. This or that place is preferred because it affords an active young man the best means for becoming suddenly very rich,

this or that profession because it is the most lucrative.

But are there no more important inquiries ? Is wealth the greatest good possible to be obtained ? I do not condemn wealth. I say not that you should not seek to possess some portion of this world's goods. I ask no one to choose poverty. Wealth is good, every thing God has made is good, when sought with right motives and directed to right ends. But why seek to be rich ? It can hardly be for the riches themselves. It must be for the purpose to which they may be applied. What shall be this purpose ? The gratification of your own appetites and propensities ? That is a low object, and one which we have already condemned, in deciding that you should not seek merely your own pleasure. Will you seek wealth, then, as the means of distinction, as the means of fixing you in what are termed the higher classes ?

This, my young friends, were still proposing an object purely selfish. In seeking it your minds are fixed upon yourselves and never escape to dwell on the good of others. But let this pass. Can you conceive of no higher good than the rank and distinction in society given by wealth ? What is the value of such rank and distinction ? How long will they last ? Go to that grave-yard and read your answer. "The grave is the grand leveller of distinctions." "The small and the great are there." The rich and the poor sleep there, side by side. The petty distinctions which obtain on earth, and which are often determined by the texture of a coat or the length of a purse, go not be-

yond the grave. Be rich, be distinguished as you may, in the grave you will be as destitute and as unheeded as the poorest. You will carry none of your possessions with you. A winding-sheet and a small spot of ground, in which your bodies may moulder back to their native dust, is, at most, all you can claim. Naked ye came into the world, and in relation to wealth, naked ye must leave it.

No, no, my young friends, ye are not to seek wealth to give you rank and distinction. There is a higher good, one to which wealth, your own pleasure, everything which can affect you, must be subordinate. What is it? My text answers, "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness." Here is the greatest, the supreme good. Here is your object. Seek the kingdom of God and his righteousness, with your whole hearts, with your whole strength.

This phrase, "kingdom of God," may mislead you. As it is commonly interpreted, it may induce you to believe it the great object of your lives to gain admittance after death into the place where reside the blest. This under a certain aspect is indeed true, but as it presents itself to you, it is too far in the distance to act upon your hearts with its full force. Something nearer by is wanted to gain the attention and fix the mind.

Instead of *kingdom* of God, the phrase should be, *reign* of God. The Greeks expressed by one word both the exercise of the kingly authority and the territory or country over which it was exercised. We have a word for each. We call the first, *reign*; the second, *kingdom*. In my text the orig-

inal word is used in the sense of reign. We are not commanded to seek the country where God reigns, but his reign itself; and that may be here, within us, for Jesus says, "the reign of God is within you."

By the "reign of God" should be understood the reign of his moral attributes or perfections. The reign of these, is the same thing as the reign of righteousness or moral goodness. It was to establish the reign of God *on earth*, that Jesus came into the world, suffered and died. It was to extend the reign of God that the Apostles labored, exposed themselves to a thousand perils, and endured martyrdom. It is for the reign of God, or of goodness, that the wise and good, in every age and in every clime, sigh and yearn.

The Gospel was the annunciation of the moral reign of God in a new and peculiar sense. The time had come for men to be governed by a new principle, for them to pass under a new moral order and to shape their actions by a new moral code. Jesus announced this new moral code. He termed it the reign of God. To seek to have God reign in each of you, and over all men, is what you are to understand by seeking the reign of God. God reigns in you when you are governed by his spirit. His spirit is the spirit of love, of goodness. When you love what God loves, desire what God wills, labor to accomplish what God proposes as the end of his works, you are governed by his spirit; you then submit yourselves to him; you then love his reign and desire all to come under it.

The reign of God is the reign of love or goodness. When then, love or goodness, reigns in you, God reigns in you. To have love, or goodness, reign in you, is the same thing as to be good yourselves, the same thing as it is to be just in all your actions, pure in all your wishes, benevolent in all your feelings and aspirations. When you are good yourselves you will delight to do good to others. When love reigns in you, you will love all men and labor for their well-being. To seek, then, the reign of God and his righteousness, may be defined, to seek to be good and to do good. To be good and to do good, this is your object. Hold this up to your mental vision. Never lose sight of it for a moment. Let all your wishes, all your exertions, all your sighings and yearnings point to this as faithful as the needle points to the pole.

Be good and do good. You must possess, in yourselves, the righteousness of God. You must have pure hearts, hearts that love all that is beautiful, that is true, that is good, that is holy ; hearts that yearn for the perfect, and keep you forever struggling to "be perfect even as your Father in heaven is perfect." And you must not only be good, possess right feelings, right wishes, but you must do good, diffuse goodness over your fellow beings to the full extent of your power.

Here, my young friends, is a good to be obtained, infinitely superior to that of merely sensual pleasure, or that which wealth can purchase.—Here is a good not for the body merely, but for the soul. In seeking this you are laboring for that part of your nature which allies you to the Divinity.

In seeking wealth or pleasure you are seeking only the gratification of appetites and propensities, which you have in common with the animals around you. In seeking the one you are seeking to be like God, in seeking the other you do not seek to rise above the beasts. In seeking this superior good you seek durable riches ; you are not laboring for the meat that perisheth, but for that which endureth unto everlasting life.

Goodness, righteousness, my young friends, is the riches of the soul. You will not leave it behind you at the mouth of the tomb. You will carry it with you. Your souls are not like your bodies. These are but for a day. They are of the earth and to the earth they must return. But those are forever. Your souls do not die. They live, and will live though the earth wax old, the stars fade away, and the outward universe itself moulder into ruins ; and whatever they acquire they may retain through everlasting ages. Seek then to enrich your souls with righteousness, a wealth that will abide and be forever increasing. In comparison with this how poor and paltry is mere worldly wealth ! What indeed does it concern the wise man what he shall eat, drink, or wherewithal he shall be clothed ? Give me a soul rich in the righteousness of God, a soul in which God holds undisputed empire, and I care little for what may affect this clog of clay, my body. I have then that within me no calamity can touch, no reproach can sully, no change destroy ; that which will resist the ravages of death, and rush off with fearlessness and joy into the darkness be-

yond the tomb. Is wealth your object, seek it here. Let it be moral wealth, for that is everlasting. Is pleasure your object, seek it here. Let it be the pleasure of being and doing good. It is a pleasure as much superior to the gratification of the appetites and propensities, as the soul is superior to the body, or as God is superior to the animals around us.

“And all these things shall be added unto you ”
 We wrong God’s providence. We are prone to think the path of virtue is obscure and pleasureless. This is wrong. God has not made the road to distinction and pleasure, lie through the fields of sin. Virtue, after all, is the surest road to them. Nothing worth possessing is ever gained except by seeking to be and to do good. Honesty is the best means, after all, to gain worldly prosperity. Virtue, high, uncompromising, moral virtue is that which gives men their fame. It is false to suppose that wealth alone gives distinction. Humanity is too true to itself. He who has labored in its behalf, is remembered, is honored ; while the selfish, those who have lived only for themselves, pass off and are forgotten, or remembered only to be execrated. Look around you, look over history, those who are most revered, in whose names there is a magic spell to wake the spirit to noble deeds, are, and were, often the poorest of earth’s many sons, in this world’s goods. Wealth, at most, gives but a momentary distinction to its possessor, and that too only in the estimation of the weakest of mankind, while virtue confers immortality.

Poverty is far from preventing men from being useful to their race, far from being able to prevent the good from being held in everlasting honor. Look at Jesus, the author of our religion. He was poor—more so than the foxes of the earth for they have holes, than the fowls of the air, for they have nests, but he had not where to lay his head. The rich and the great of his time scorned him; he was persecuted, rejected, crucified; and yet, we on this day, in this house, eighteen hundred years after, are met together in his name, to pay homage to his worth. To human appearance a Jewish peasant, put to death as a malefactor, has created a new moral world, and throughout all civilized nations the people meet, on this day, in their thousands of temples, to honor his example and bear witness to the power of his moral excellence. Who thinks the less of him because he was poor, because he was not, in his day and generation, the idol of the great, because only the “common people heard him gladly?”

But take another example, one more strictly human, that of Socrates. He was poor, so poor that he begged a cloak. And, was not only poor, but he refused to be rich. He was so unpopular, if I may use the term, that he was put to death as a criminal. Yet his name lives. It has come down to us through more than two thousand years, and it will live forever. Every man who wishes to know himself and be a philosopher, is proud to bestow an eulogium upon his character. And why? Socrates felt that his powers belonged to humanity, that he was not placed in this world to pursue

only his own pleasure, that God had made him to be useful, and he exerted himself to improve the world in knowledge and in virtue. He sought to be good and to do good, and became the father of philosophy. Hence his fame.

Were there no rich men in his times ? Where are they ? Will ye tell me their names ? Will ye point me to their monuments ? Look ye round for them ? Ye will not find them. The rich men who had nothing but their riches to distinguish them are forgotten. Their names have perished ; but the philosopher, the man of mind and virtue, lives and seems to us as one of our familiar acquaintances, as one of our personal friends.—Which would ye prefer, the momentary distinction of the rich, and the long silence which comes over them, or the everlasting remembrance which awaits the good ?

Aristides, called the Just, is another name that has come down to us from a time still more remote. What has preserved his memory ? His wealth ? Who knows, or thinks of asking, whether he was rich or poor ? He was a brave warrior ; but others have been as brave, have been greater in battle, but they are forgotten. Why is he remembered ? **HE WAS JUST.** He was remarkable for his strict virtue. That has given him his fame and ranked him among the real nobility of our race.—That embalmed his memory, has transmitted it to us, and will transmit it to the latest posterity.—Thousands of other examples might be adduced to prove that it is the good alone who really are honored, that real distinction is acquired only by real

worth, by unreserved devotion to God and humanity.

And, my young friends, have you no ambition to have your names live after you, to be held in everlasting honor by the generations which are to come? Do you not wish for a fame like that of a Socrates, or of an Aristides? Have it then.—You can. You can all be just, be virtuous as Aristides was, and if so the world will not let you die. You will survive death; you will live in your works, in the services you render to humanity, in the gratitude of a posterity honoring your examples and blessing you for their happiness. But even should men forget you, you will be remembered in heaven. Worth, however concealed from human eyes, never escapes the notice of our God. He sees it, he honors it, however lowly it may be, however obscure the retreat in which it seeks to hide itself. And is not the notice of your Creator worth more to you than that of men? Can you desire any greater distinction than to be honored by the great and eternal God?

Would you be useful to your fellow beings, would you have the world the better for your having lived in it, would you, in fine, have power over men to induce them to pursue their own good, be virtuous, be righteous. Goodness is never lost. While you are acquiring good feelings, the christian virtues, in comparative solitude, with no eclat, unknown, you may be conferring the greatest possible benefits upon your race. While fitting yourselves for the indwelling of God, you are fitting yourselves to exert the greatest power that man

can exert over the destinies of his race. And should you never be called upon to display your worth in public, it will not be lost. It will quicken some heart, influence some mind, aid in forming some character, and that will do the same by another, and that by still another, and thus on till the whole earth comes to feel its power.

The little stone cut from the mountains without hands, grew to be a mountain that filled the whole earth. Every good man is a little stone cut from the mountains without hands, has within himself a principle of growth that will fill the earth with benefits. No man is fully conscious of the power he may wield. No one fully comprehends the advantageous situation he occupies. He who exemplifies, in its perfection, a single moral virtue, he who discovers and places in the world, a single new truth in morals, in religion or in the philosophy of mind, outdoes the proudest of earth's heroes, exerts a power greater than any king or emperor ever did or ever can exert. He commences a new creation, forms the nucleus of a new world, round which atom after atom shall gravitate, till it becomes a new heavenly body to revolve forever in a new moral orbit.

My young friends, forget never, I pray you, the infinite power of virtue, of moral worth. It gives you all you can desire for yourselves; it gives you lasting riches, the purest and highest pleasure, confers upon you immortal honor, and distinguishes you for time and for eternity, with men and with God. Carry this lesson with you. Whatever you would have, whatever you can desire, wealth, pleasure,

fame, lasting and wide extended usefulness, know that you gain them, but by "seeking first the kingdom of God and his righteousness." All that is worth having is in God, and you gain it only by studying and exerting yourselves with all your might to be like him.

My young friends, I cannot close without reminding you again, that you are soon to be the active generation. On you is our dependence. On you is the dependence of the church for her earthly support. She looks to you for new sons and daughters. On you too rest the hopes of our country. Our country will ask much of you. Your voices must aid in deciding its destiny. You will soon be called to influence, in various ways, the laws to be enacted and the general measures to be adopted. Among you are those who are to be the fathers and mothers of future lawgivers and rulers of a free country. Even some whom I address may be called upon to fill offices of the highest honor and responsibility.

On you too, as an integral part of the human family, rest in some degree the hopes of humanity. The human race is not always to be sunk in vice and crime as it is now. Human society is not always to be as imperfect as it now is. Man is not always to be the foe of man, the greatest plague and tormenter of his kind. The whole family of man is to be brought together, to form one body, to have one soul, and to feel the pulsations of one universal heart. Here is your work, to fill the world with love and joy. See here too, in reference to the church, to your country, and to human-

ity, what tremendous responsibilities rest upon you. In church, in state, in humanity, there is to be a progress, and you are sent into the world, endowed with intellect and feeling, the power of reasoning and of sympathy, to aid it. Be faithful to your mission. Prove yourselves equal to your responsibilities; prove yourselves superior to the generation preceding you; be able to say in your dying hour, that the world has been the better for your having lived, and may God bless you both now and forever. AMEN.